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Print the legend

No one ever would have said she was a beautiful woman – she wouldn't have said it of herself – but when she stood in front of you, the smoke from the black cigar jammed into the corner of her mouth stinging your eyes, the smell of gasoline and engine grease clinging to her as tightly as the oilslicked jeans she wore tucked into scuffed boots, then, somehow, as she lifted her aviator's glasses and measured your worth with a long, cool look, you knew she was going to get her own way. And you knew that her way was going to be outrageous, eccentric and almost certainly dangerous, if not damn near fatal; and there wasn't much you could do about it because she'd stood up to the toughest, this thickset ex-society girl who'd made herself into a flying legend.

She'd traded insults with Howard Hughes and drinks with Chuck Yeager; she'd pursued a simmering feud with Jacqueline Cochran, the good girl of women's aviation and fought the US Air Force to a stalemate; she'd spent her childhood in a vast mansion on Pasadena's Millionaires Row and would share her last days with coyotes and lizards and a few dozen half-wild dogs in a stone shack in the Mojave desert. She was born Florence Lowe but would live most of her life, after discarding an inconvenient first husband, as Pancho Barnes.

Her countryman Mark Twain might well have written that her life was 'full of surprises and adventures, and incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities, but they are all true, they all happened.' Twain had actually penned the words after a visit to Australia, but Pancho would never have let a mere island continent stand in the way of her life or legend; she would have hitched up her pants, wiped her hands more or less clean and growled: 'Hell, we had more fun in a week than those weenies had in a lifetime!'

And fun she had, like the day 'General' Pancho Barnes led her own air-force across the country on a mercy flight to rescue the Cisco Kid from jail – a mission that didn't quite pan out the way she had hoped, despite the personal

intervention of President Roosevelt; or the night she told General James Doolittle of the Air Force, and authentic American hero, 'Damn it all, Jimmy, I can out-fly you and I can out-fuck you any time,' and went ahead, so she always said, and proved it.

Conventions existed to be undermined, overturned and thrown out, not that Pancho's sense of fun was invariably shared by her victims. About three months after gaining her pilot's licence in 1928 she formed The Pancho Barnes Flying Mystery Circus of the Air (there never was anything modest about her ambitions), reasoning that the best way to get experience and have some fun along the way was to fly like a madwoman and get paid for it. She joined up with a young parachutist called Slim Zaunmiller and they put together a series of stunts for the popular air shows that were becoming more common.

One of Pancho's favourite routines involved dropping a roll of toilet paper from the cockpit of the plane and following it down, flying through it, cutting it with her wings in a spiral so tight that every strut and wire was strained to the limit. After this, Slim would perform a series of novelty parachute jumps, finally swooping in over the gawping crowd and landing within feet of some bemused country girl who he would then proceed to charm into taking what was almost certainly her first flight.

She could see what a fine pilot Pancho was and Slim's easy manner soon allayed any fears. He even insisted that she wear a parachute so that nothing could possibly go wrong.

Installed in the open cockpit with Slim beside her, the passenger soon got over her anxieties and began to enjoy the unique experience of seeing the town she had lived in all her life from an entirely new point of view. Maybe she'd point out her house or the school she'd attended, or the shop or office where she worked, as Pancho brought the plane in low over the dusty streets or flew along the railway track while Slim explained how pilots used it as a guide across the vastness of the unmapped prairies.

Finally they returned to the field outside town where the air show was being held and took the plane up, higher and higher, until the spectators shrank to pinheads and the entranced young passenger could almost see the curve of the earth. And then Pancho looked over her shoulder with a grin and flipped the stick; the plane sideslipped dramatically, the cockpit spun towards the ground far below and in one heart-stopping moment Slim tipped the girl out, pulling her ripcord as she went. Pancho slammed the stick back, jerking the tail out of the parachute's path, leaving the shrieking passenger to fall through the emptiest space she was ever likely to experience – howling, flailing wildly, giving the crowd a gladiatorial, not to say burlesque, thrill as the parachute opened and, with its burden – limp now with shock and horror – drifted slowly down to earth where, after a lunatic descent, the plane had already landed and Slim was waiting to catch her before she crumpled to the grass.

The state of mind experienced by the novice parachutists can readily be imagined but, as far as we know, none of them were physically harmed, though whether their dignity recovered or they ever ventured above the first floor again in their lives is another matter. Certainly, nobody sued and no irate boyfriends, brothers or parents took a swing at the aviators. In the six months the Mystery Circus blazed its way across the skies of the American mid-west, Pancho was able to add 60 hours flying time to her logbook and Slim's name to her long list of lovers.

Sex, Pancho always said, was *almost* as much fun as piloting her own plane and she had no qualms about enjoying as much of both as she could pack into her busy schedule; however, while the men came and went, it was a love of flying that was written on her heart – an emotion inspired by the most important man in her life, her grandfather Thaddeus Lowe.

At her first air show, when she was eight and watching, entranced, as pilots like Glenn Curtiss and Lincoln Beechey flew low over the crowds in their experimental biplanes (and in 1910, just six years after the Wright brothers' first flight,

anything that got off the ground and stayed up was experimental) her grandfather told her, 'When you grow up, everyone will be flying aeroplanes. You'll be a pilot too.'

The child had no reason to disbelieve him. He knew what he was talking about as far as the wide blue yonder went; Thaddeus Lowe had been one of the hot-air balloon pioneers of America, making his first ascent in 1857 at the age of 25.

Born in 1832, the child of farmers, Lowe had been apprenticed to a cobbler but his natural bent was towards scientific discovery and entrepreneurship, a fortunate combination, since the one would allow him to indulge the other. One of his earliest experiments involved flying the family cat by kite and, though it's hard to imagine what scientific principles he intended this to establish, he did discover that it was a popular spectacle among the kids of the town. It was a lesson the young scientist never forgot – no matter how fake or tawdry the show, grab the crowd's attention and they'll come back for more and pay for the privilege.

After finishing his apprenticeship, rather than settle down to mending other men's boots, he joined a carnival show and set up as The Professor of Chemistry, amazing and delighting the rubes with violent explosions and noxious smells conjured from mysterious coloured liquids and powders. Using the profits from his act he started to experiment with balloon flight, setting himself to learn everything he could about air currents and meteorological phenomena before delving into the chemistry of gases and the engineering of an airship large enough to carry passengers on continental journeys. It was a grandiose project and Thaddeus had neither the experience nor the finance to support the scheme. The airship refused to take off, his money began to run out, so he turned from the commonsense world of the carnival to the madness and mayhem of business, starting a company and soliciting funds to build a smaller craft which would test 'the mercantile and pecuniary benefits' of flight. Balloons were in the speculative air in those pre-war years and enough investors were persuaded to part with their

money for Lowe to set up his company and begin his experiments.

His first series of tests was aimed at the upper atmosphere, where he concluded, prophetically, that high-speed winds would propel his craft with a swiftness that would make even transatlantic crossings viable. After one flight, when the winds were speedier than usual, he found himself seriously off-course and landed in South Carolina just days after the Confederacy had announced itself by firing on Fort Sumter. Descending as he appeared, from some 'etherial or infernal region', and quite obviously a Yankee spy, he was lucky to escape with his skin and balloon intact.

He always said it was the old carnival skills of persuasion that got him through, but when he arrived back in Washington, realising, as has many another entrepreneur, that war means opportunity, those same powers failed. He tried to convince the high command of the Union Army that this new war could be fought in the air as well as on the ground. The General Staff rejected the 'patently absurd' suggestion that balloons might have a military application; carrier pigeons were about as far as they could see – and they weren't too sure about them, figuring that hungry soldiers would shoot them down for lunch.

Not a man to be easily set back, Thaddeus arranged a demonstration of his ballooning skills from the lawn in front of the Smithsonian Institute, which had (so he maintained) recently awarded him the title of Professor for his lighter-than-air studies. Once aloft, the aviator sent a Morse code message to President Lincoln, informing him that the city, laid out below 'with its perimeter of fortified encampments', made a fine and bracing sight in the morning sun. Lincoln was less hidebound or more prescient than his commanders and it wasn't long before Lowe was given command of the newly created Union Balloon Corps, charged with reconnaissance and battlefield intelligence. Many years later, his granddaughter liked to say that Thaddeus Lowe was the real founder of the US Air Force, though he was never actually a member of the military. He operated as an

Irregular, dressed in frock coat and top hat, and would ascend in his metal-lined basket and telegraph information about the enemy's dispositions, take photographs and amend existing maps. He was under constant fire from both sides, since the average soldier wasn't quite sure what it was up there but he knew damn well he didn't like it. Lowe was once called 'the most shot-at man in the war' but he came through unscathed – though not unchanged.

After hostilities ceased, he decided to spend more time with his growing family, and settled in Pasadena where he concentrated on business and started up successful gas, electric and ice companies and founded the Citizens' Bank of Los Angeles. He built a spectacular narrow gauge railway along the spine of the San Gabriel Mountains, an impossible project that he brought to completion but that was to bring him, in 1899, to bankruptcy. However, if he had lost his money, he still had his dreams of a planet-spanning airship and a cable car that would cross mountain ranges. These dreams he shared with his grandchildren, and principally with Florence, a girl bought up to be genteel and determined (encouraged, one suspects) by the example of her unconventional grandfather, to be anything but!

Florence's childhood would have been ideal to anyone but Florence. Though grandfather Lowe had lost the family firm, her father, Thaddeus Jnr, had married a local heiress, Flora Mae Dobbins, and the family were able to maintain their position amongst the *haut bourgeoisie* of Pasadena. Tad Jnr raised thoroughbreds, whilst Flora Mae was a pillar of the local Episcopalian church of St James, an association that would cause her wayward daughter not a little inconvenience in times to come.

Mark Twain had typified the last decades of the nineteenth century as the gilded age, but there was nothing gilded about the Lowes – their wealth and lifestyle was 24-carat gold all the way through. The family ran a butler and they had servants, a swimming pool and a 35-room mansion, a half-mile diameter exercise ring for Tad Jnr's horses and for little Florence as well: she got her first pony at the age of three and

was competing in local shows, and winning prizes, by the time she was six. She had everything she wanted – except her mother's attention. Her elder brother William was a weak and sensitive boy who took up most of Flora Mae's time and emotion (and made little impression on his sister or father) until his death from leukaemia when Florence was 12.

The girl, by then, was well set on her path in life and had discovered she preferred, and looked better in, jeans and shirt than in the frou-frou and big hats of late Edwardian style. Mother and child tried to come together in the face of William's loss, but somehow they just couldn't fit: Florence contemptuously kicking a box of French lingerie, a gift from her mother, across the room probably didn't help, but it does seem to have epitomised the relationship between the two women. With luck or wisdom beyond her years, the daughter realised she would never be a conventional girl; pretty in frocks, supportive in conversation, modest in behaviour. She was not and would not hurt herself by trying to be so: she would not be anything other than what she was, a decision underpinned by the wealth of her family but principally inspired by a temperament that loved risk and adventure and would try almost anything once.

After attending junior school quite happily – she was the only girl among 23 boys – she embarked on a career of wrecking whatever hope her mother had of turning her into a Pasadena debutante. She worked through four schools in eight years and ended up lying in a pool of her own blood on the floor of her dormitory, a suicide note pinned to her chest. Amid the screams of her room-mates she winked, grinned, got up and started cleaning off the red ink; it had all been . . . fun.

She did, however, have an ambition: she wanted to be a vet and work with animals, principally the horses and dogs, she loved. As far as Mrs Lowe was concerned, however, no way was any daughter of the Lowes of South Orange Grove Avenue going to tramp around inseminating cattle and gelding . . . No, the very thought was too much for her! Once

young Florence had graduated, her mother put her foot down and persuaded her daughter to study art at a local college while a marriage was arranged.

The Lowes decided that the groom was to be the Reverend Rankin Barnes, the son of the incumbent at the family's very own and highly respectable Episcopalian church. He was youngish – only ten years older than his intended bride – and that was considered no problem; he was also handsome, had an easy manner and was popular with his parishioners. His position (he was soon to succeed his father to the pulpit of St James) would, Flora Mae hoped, lend him the authority necessary to curb his young wife's wilder ways. All in all, the Reverend Barnes seems to have been a pleasant, hard-working fellow, respected by his superiors, with a good future before him in the church; which rather begs the question, why did he do it?

He knew Florence; he had spoken at her college graduation ceremony and must have heard the rumours of her unconventional behaviour. Mrs Lowe had arranged early-morning rides for the young folks and while it is unlikely that the bride-to-be spat out any of her more colourful language, she would have been hard put to hide her essential nature. Maybe it was the prospect of sharing, and administering, as any decent husband might, the various large sums of money that would come to Florence from a number of trust funds that encouraged Reverend Barnes. On the other hand, after the marriage, Barnes never appeared to show any interest at all in Pancho's wealth, priding himself on supporting his family from his own stipend. It is more than possible that he was fond of the lively young woman – the couple were to remain friends long after they stopped being husband and wife – or perhaps he set a high value on an association with the family influence, and the Lowes and the Dobbins had much of that in Pasadena. Barnes never talked about his marriage in later years and although Florence talked about everything under the sun, she seems to have respected her first husband's reticence. Whatever the reasons, the Rev. Rankin Barnes was ready

and willing to let himself in for what he was surely going to receive.

The real mystery lies inside the 18-year-old Florence Lowe. What in hell's name, as she would have said, was she thinking about? This girl had quite calmly led her favourite horse up the oak-panelled stairs of her school and installed him in her room, explaining to an enraged headmistress that, 'Poor Dobbins was so lonesome he came to find me.' Something, one might speculate, that her busy mother, Flora Mae Dobbins Lowe, would never have done.

Lauren Kessler, in her Barnes biography *The Happy Bottom Riding Club*, suggests that Florence was still, despite all, seeking her mother's approval and this, combined with the attraction of getting out from under the parental roof at a time when it was difficult for a young woman to commit herself to a career, was enough to push her in the required direction. Besides, the Reverend Barnes was by no means an unappealing fellow. The prospect of being the centre of attention at a big society wedding probably played a part, as did a natural pride in getting one over her prettier school friends by marrying the most eligible bachelor in town. When Barnes had given the graduation speech at her last college, he had caused a number of hearts to flutter though, significantly, not Florence's. And, after all, if there was no real reason *to* marry, there was equally no reason *not to* and though it would have been fascinating to know what advice grandfather Thaddeus Lowe might have given, he was long gone by now and, unless she were to jump aboard one of his Planet Airships and fly out to the territories, it looked pretty much like Miss Lowe was heading for the altar and the marriage bed.

Out of the two, the altar was the better option. The Lowes were an important family, the wedding was all that could have been expected: the church decked out with greenery; carriages and gentlemen in morning dress; the bride in organza ruffles with a bouquet of roses and lilies; the groom's father officiating, as solid and trustworthy as the church which stood, four-square and Protestant, around

them. Back at the Lowe mansion a wedding feast awaited the guests and while an orchestra played popular tunes, the bride changed out of her gown and into an expertly tailored suit that brought out her best features.

The young couple left by limousine for the first night of their honeymoon in San Bernadino; on arrival they walked in the limpid evening light, ate dinner and made their way, together, to a marriage bed that neither regarded with anything short of extreme unease. For all her wild ways, Florence Lowe's ideas of love, marriage and the duties thereof were learned from romantic fiction and films. Her new husband, older by a decade, was her equal in inexperience; his ideas stopped and started with the bits you could see – chatter across the breakfast table, the minister and his wife entertaining the sewing circle or opening civic functions, and, of course, church on Sunday – the less mentionable functions, apart from the necessity of conceiving children, had best remain exactly that: unmentionable.

The first night was a non-event. Florence lay on her side of the bed in her new, lacy nightgown; Rankin lay on his, pyjamas buttoned up to the neck: neither made a romantic move. The next morning they travelled on to the Grand Canyon where the grandeur of nature had little or no effect on the heights, or depths, of mutual passion and the second night followed the same pattern as the first. On the third night, Rankin Barnes pulled himself together, looked his conscience firmly in the eye and made it clear that, distasteful as they both found the subject, it was now his wife's duty to provide him with his conjugal rights. Given her later appetite for, and open delight in sex, Florence's first experience could not have been more unpromising. She reported later that neither of them enjoyed it; not that Rankin expected to, it was all down to duty as far as he was concerned. Florence, who had hoped for more, hated it from start to finish and decided there and then that there would be no repetitions; as far as we know, she and her husband only spent that one night together throughout their marriage and

for a woman whose luck was to hold remarkably good far longer than she had any right to expect, it must have seemed like a bad joke when, within weeks, she discovered she was pregnant.

She didn't like that much either – though characteristically she boasted to her friends: 'Guess what, I gotta bun in my oven. That's more than you bastards can manage!' A few months after the couple had moved into their new home, she began refusing to go out, citing her awful, unnatural shape. She did keep riding her beloved horses as long as she was able to, but married life was about to provide her with another shock: she was expected to behave like the minister's lady.

Not unreasonably, the Rev. Barnes intended to support his wife on his income and, in return, receive her support for his ministry. He was a popular preacher, at least with the local ladies, and was often called out on late-night missions of spiritual mercy. A beacon of propriety, he always took Florence along too, though she had to sit in the car just in case Barnes had to use the excuse of her presence to make a quick getaway. She was also expected to teach Sunday school, a task she got round by bribing her pupils with jackknives for learning their texts.

Being pregnant, stuck in a respectable household where homily was the order of the day and, for the first time in her life, without the resource of unlimited money, might well have made Florence think deeply about her life and position. This might well have happened with any other young woman but not the new Mrs Barnes. She was, and always had been, a woman of action. First, however, there was the matter of the baby.

Taken into hospital for the birth, she insisted that her favourite dog, Nicky, a ferocious German Shepherd, accompany her; the doctors, of course, refused outright. The dog moved in under her hospital bed and stayed there, growling at everyone who got closer than a couple of yards. After the birth (the baby was named William Emmet, after her dead brother), Florence brought him home, laid him on

the floor so Nicky could have a good sniff, and more or less forgot about him for the next 14 years, consigning him to her husband and a series of nurses.

Within a couple of years of the birth of her son, Florence's mother, Flora Mae, died of a heart attack – high blood pressure ran in the family and was to cause serious problems for Florence later in her life. Once the funeral was over, it was clear that apart from the Rev. Rankin Barnes, there was no one left to please any more by trying to act like a conventional young wife.

Florence's first concern was to get away from the stifling atmosphere of life at the rectory, which led naturally to her second concern: the means of escape. She didn't want to divorce her husband: for all their incompatibility, the two weren't bad friends, just hopeless partners, and they reasoned, without exactly stating the facts, that separate lives under the same roof was the best answer for them both. It would give Florence the status and freedom of a married woman and allow Rankin to continue his ascent into the hierarchy of the Episcopalian church unchecked by scandal.

Various bequests beckoned, but they were all in the future and right now Florence needed money to pay for a full-time nurse for little Billy and cover the expenses that the housekeeping did not, which meant just about everything she really wanted to do. Thinking the matter over, she came to the inevitable conclusion that the one saleable talent she possessed was raising, training and working horses, and she began riding in public again, attending shows and exhibitions, picking up what jobs she could, including a stint as a double for the travelling evangelist Aimee Semple Macpherson in the preaching and riding act she took around local rodeos.

Better paid and more exciting work came her way in the film industry. Dozens of cowboy films and serials were being shot in the hills and scrubland around nearby Los Angeles, and Florence began to gain a reputation as a horse wrangler who could get her animals to do just about anything the director required of them, from running alongside a

careering stagecoach to making death-defying leaps over yawning crevasses so the hero could escape the posse or the Indians or the men in the black hats. She could also, in a time when union influence was less powerful than it later became, heft the weight of a camera for mounted tracking shots or turn her talents to continuity, lighting a set or doubling for the star, and with her stocky build she could cover for hero and heroine alike, a considerable saving on the usual tight film budgets. She even tried her hand at script-writing, renewing a friendship with the Austrian director Erich von Stroheim, whom she had met years before when he was working as a stable boy while trying to get a foothold in the film industry. They started a number of screenplays and set up a company to novelise popular films, though the venture came to nothing since both soon moved on to other projects.

By the winter of 1924, Florence was able to use her film money to hire a nurse for Billy, a couple of housemaids for the rectory and have a good time for herself. It was the Jazz Age, and she began running with a young and dangerous set, half film people, half wild young society kids, all of them determined to prove that Prohibition was not going to stop them having a great time. Rankin Barnes began to find himself lumbered with the kind of house guests who usually lurked in his worst and wildest dreams; he also found himself with bathtubs full of brewing gin and midnight visits from the local bootlegger. This was not the way to impress the good people of Pasadena, and he asked Florence to shift her activities elsewhere. She was happy to do so, moving into a cliffside mansion she had recently inherited.

The couple still got together at weekends, after church, which Florence did not attend (there was no young wife looking up adoringly at Rankin as he preached), when they would take baby Billy over for lunch with Florence's father and his new wife – until the baby's vile and utterly uncontrolled behaviour drove Tad Jnr to request an end to familial visiting.

According to some accounts, at this time Florence began an affair with a student at Pomona College, a young man as

eager as she was to 'discover the mysteries', as she put it, and having discovered them once, the young couple proceeded to spend the next few months discovering them all over again and again, until Florence, feeling like she'd 'won a battle and whipped the world', was unable to resist sharing her happiness with her husband. And one has to say it, there was definitely something of the saint about the Rev. Barnes, because he forgave her and merely requested, though in his firmest voice, that the affair cease. Florence, having just come into an inheritance through her late mother, agreed to leave her boyfriend and the country on an extended cruise down to South America.

On the cruise she was to meet the first of a series of lovers who conformed to her ideal of a real man. Don Rockwell was a tall, tanned, devil-may-care adventurer with dark eyes and a dazzling smile. He was sophisticated, a man of many worlds, not all of them strictly legal, he was a good and thoughtful lover and made it quite clear from the beginning that he had no intention of ever being caught in the marriage trap. He was the hero of a thousand romantic novels and films, the man Florence had married in her dreams and, by rights, he ought to have been a lothario who would use and abuse the young woman who'd fallen for him and leave her lovelorn and alone. Not that Florence was exactly a wilting flower – she had no illusions about Don, he had none about her, they enjoyed each other with gusto as the liner cruised down to Rio. Don even went so far as to dedicate a poem, *The Jungle Kitten*, to her 'tawny, satin hide' and penchant for being 'fondled all the time'. The romance lasted the length of the voyage and ended as the voyage ended – with a brief final act in Greenwich village. Florence had come a long way in a few years, though once she was back in Pasadena it didn't seem all that far at all, and the Jungle Kitten began looking for something else to test her mettle.

One drunken evening, sitting around with a group of actors, stuntmen and cameramen, sharing wild stories – and in America during Prohibition anyone who took a drink could find themselves on the wrong side of the law – one of

the party suggested they get jobs as crew on a freighter he knew of that was heading down to Mexico. It sounded fun, maybe a bit risky, but he assured them the ship was seaworthy and the Captain at least as sober as they were. As it turned out, the Captain showed a good deal of common sense when presented with the idea and insisted on hiring a friend of his, Roger Chute, a graduate with wanderlust and sailing skills, as helmsman for the trip.

Florence figured that no one would let a girl aboard a tramp steamer so she cut her hair, slicked what was left back with oil, slipped into jeans and a shirt and, with a cigar clenched between her teeth, was able – or allowed on account of her money – to pass as one of the boys. With Chute navigating, the voyage passed comfortably enough, the 'crew' slipping ashore every so often for a wild night, until they reached the Mexican port of San Blas, where they found themselves on the edge of a revolution.

The *Cristeros*, religious rebels, were fighting a war against what they saw as the anti-Catholic policies of the Mexican government; the army and the forces of law were in the centre of the country facing the fanatical insurgents, leaving the coast undefended against bandits, a small army of whom were besieging San Blas, shooting at random into the town from the surrounding hills, demanding a vast ransom before they would pack up and leave. The sight of an American ship in harbour offered a solution to the townspeople: they boarded the vessel, impounded it, then loaded all their valuables on to it. The bandits were determined that the vessel would not escape with the booty. In some stories, the ship itself was involved in the rebellion, carrying contraband arms for the *Cristeros.* True or not, the outcome was stalemate: The Captain wouldn't or couldn't put to sea, the townspeople wouldn't or couldn't get off, so the days passed as everyone sat it out under the bandits' bullets.

Until one dark night when Florence, or Jake Crow as she was known aboard, took a late walk on deck and saw Roger Chute, the helmsman, preparing to slip overboard. He'd had

enough of sitting around and was going to make a break for it, heading inland before turning back towards the US border. 'Jake' insisted on going with him, but he wasn't fooled; he had no intention of being stuck with a girl on this dangerous trek. This was not the best thing to say to Florence at any time and after she'd proved herself as a deckhand for several weeks, working and drinking as hard as any of the guys, it was foolish. If he was going, she was going. Rather than give up the chance, Chute agreed, she could come along but if she fell behind, she'd be on her own.

They slipped ashore, bribed their way through the bandits' lines with whisky, hired a horse for Chute and a mule for Florence and set off across country. It was the hot season and the land was brutal, with mile after mile of desert, sage, cactus and blinding sun out of which bandit, soldier or revolutionary might appear at any moment; and Florence was having more fun than she'd ever had before in her life. Looking at Chute, sitting atop his skinny white horse, she told him (in one version of the story) he looked like Don Quixote, setting out on his adventures. Chute, who considered himself to be something of a philosopher, responded that if he was the Don, then Florence was surely his squire, Sancho Panza. Florence said she preferred Pancho to Sancho and Chute agreed: it was a good Mexican name and for the duration of the trip that's who she'd be. He didn't for a moment guess that, from that time on, for the rest of her life, that's who she'd be: Pancho Barnes.

Chute's misgivings about Pancho's stamina were to prove misplaced; as they trekked over a thousand miles to the eastern seaport of Vera Cruz, she not only kept up, she kept him alive when he contracted blood poisoning and she had to commandeer a passing American so the two of them could stretcher him miles across rough country to an oil refinery doctor. In return, Chute shared his philosophy of personal responsibility, toughness in the face of adversity and enjoyment of the moment. This sounded pretty good to Pancho, who'd just crossed Mexico, been fired on by rebels and government troops, begged, borrowed and, on occasion,

stolen food and drink and all without spending a cent. She was beginning to see what she really wanted out of life: adventure, sex and good buddies who'd risk their lives for you, just as you would for them.

Shortly after arriving back in Pasadena – where she called on the Rev. Barnes, brown as a nut, poncho-clad with a cigarillo between her teeth – she was to find the activity that would give her the adventure she craved. She and Rankin Barnes also finally separated, amicably and still without thought of divorce. The final straw for Rankin had come shortly after Pancho's return home, when she mentioned casually (or not) at a dinner party one night, that she was feeling antsy and really needed a good fuck. He hastily applied for an executive post at the New York headquarters of the church; she went out to a nearby airstrip with her cousin Dean, who was going to take flying lessons.

Pancho, being Pancho, decided that flying looked like fun and asked Dean's teacher, Ben Caitlin, if she could sign on as a pupil. Like a lot of pilots, Caitlin had little time for women out of the home and none at all for them in the cockpit. He explained that he had reluctantly taken on three or four girls as pupils in the past and none of them had soloed or even finished the course; they just didn't have the grit to do the hard work required. Looking at the ramshackle operation Caitlin was running – paint peeling off his hangar, office and run-down Travel Air biplane – Pancho reckoned ready money might be an inducement and offered to pay for a trial flight there and then. Caitlin reckoned that five dollars for fifteen minutes was fair – and would at least buy a drink or two for the boys that evening – and agreed to take her up. He thought that if he threw the plane around the sky violently enough, she'd soon have all and more than she wanted of flying and he'd be rid of her. He was wrong, of course.

After loops, turns, spirals, stalls, dives, spins and rolls, after 'wringing her out' as pilots put it, he landed and asked if she still wanted to learn to fly. 'Hell, yes,' she said, 'I want to learn to fly.'

Over the next three months Pancho dedicated every free moment to Ben Caitlin and his Travel Air, learning the hand signals by which pilot and pupil had to communicate, becoming familiar with simple but basic manoeuvres like banking and figure-of-eight turns, getting used to landing and taking off and 'touch and goes', where the pilot just allowed the wheels to kiss the field; she also had to learn emergency procedures, countering a stall, putting the plane into a spin and getting out of it again. She drank in everything Caitlin had to teach her and was so avid to go solo she bought her own Travel Air for $5000 (which was five times the average annual income in California).

Since she couldn't fly her new plane without a licence, she had a photograph taken of herself on her favourite horse, jumping over the tail section, with the caption: 'I'm in the air over my new Travel Air.'

Pancho soloed on 6 September 1928. Ben Caitlin had his first successful woman student, and was mightily relieved to pass her out. Pancho was back in the air five minutes after her solo flight, carrying a childhood friend, Nelse Griffin, who was so excited by the experience that he decided to try a little wing-walking. Any other new pilot would have forbidden such a crazy stunt: Pancho told him to go ahead and while the young man climbed out through the wires and struts, she brought the plane in low across the field, chasing her shadow at fifty feet. One Sunday soon after this, she flew over St James church, where the Rev. Rankin had just delivered a valedictory sermon before setting off for New York. In the silence of the following prayer the parishioners heard the sound of an aeroplane engine getting louder and louder – and louder. Pancho circled the church tower three times: she knew she didn't have to be down there any more, she was in heaven right where she was, or as she put it in her own, inimitable way, she was as happy 'as a sex maniac in a whorehouse'.

Pancho realised that even with the Mystery Circus under her belt, she was still an inexperienced pilot, and set about getting a few long-distance flights in her logbook. She also

bought herself a newer, faster plane, a Travel Air Speedwing, which sounded like the kind of craft she'd enjoy. And she did, flying, throughout 1928–29, hundreds of miles up and down the coast of California, airfield hopping, following the coast road, dropping in on old friends and, more important, making new ones and establishing a reputation in the aviation community.

Her instructor, Ben Caitlin, had moved his base of operations and was working out of Carpentaria, where he was managing the local airfield. He was no longer so anti-women, at least, not anti-Pancho; she had won his respect with her tough, no-nonsense attitude and now he welcomed her into the back office where, after the day's business was over, he and the boys would sit around and talk flying. And she loved 'hangar flying' as it was known, with whichever pilots might be passing or stopping over for the night. They would talk about engines and wind speed, the problems of navigation, of keeping the craft in the air in stormy conditions, about the risks of night flying when a pilot might find himself following a set of car headlights while looking for somewhere to land. And always, at the back of everyone's mind, was the simple fact that they were engaged in one of the most dangerous occupations in the world and that each and every one of them found this terrifying and exhilarating in equal measure. The daily risk was the whole point – it meant, as someone once said after a party, that 'I guess we have more fun than the people.'

The shifting nightly gathering of pilots even became an informal but very exclusive club, the Short Snorts; the membership card was a dollar bill signed by each one of the group. Anyone who turned up without his bill was liable to find himself landed with the evening's bar bill – and that could be expensive! Pancho never forgot her banknote but, somehow still ended up paying, quite happily, for many evenings. She had inherited two mansions by this time, one at San Marino, which became an unofficial clubhouse for the Short Snorts (it also became a glorified bar where the liquor never ran out and rarely had to be paid for) and the other, a

cliffside dwelling at Laguna Beach. Here she extended her Hollywood contacts and began hosting parties for her more respectable, but no less wild, friends. One night, a Mexican Air Force colonel ate the underwear of a visiting actress (apparently he was known as a serial pants eater, which may help explain the poor record of the Mexican air service) and evenings seldom ended without the swimming pool filled with tuxedoed matinee idols and starlets dressed by Adrien of Hollywood. Pancho's old pal Erich von Stroheim was an early caller and soon became a fixture, sporting his monocle, Prussian-style shaven neck and riding crop. One of his favourite pastimes was to stir up quarrels with his friends, thinking it 'sharpened them up' and gave them a proper respect for his aristocratic breeding, which was, appropriately in this movie-land setting, as fake as the 'von' in front of his name. At one party, he chose to tease Pancho about her Mexico trip, asking if she'd really posed as a man. She told him it was all true. He grinned and shrugged in his Viennese way and told her that it was impossible for any woman to convincingly ape a man. Pancho told him to try *this* and see what kind of man she made, and hit him hard enough to knock him on his bottom.

Other guests included the screen idol Ramon Navarro, a man in the flashing-teeth-buccaneer mould of Don Rockwell, and Pancho found herself more than a little attracted to him. Unfortunately, his style didn't include women, at least not between the sheets, so Pancho had to be content with his friendship; and since he was a pilot, that was no problem at all. Norma Shearer, and the young John Wayne, then making his first picture; famous aviators like Jimmy Doolittle and Roscoe Turner, who used to fly with his pet lion-cub as companion: they all called in and stayed over for the non-stop party – the young, the beautiful, the rich and famous.

Pancho was young and rich, but she wanted to up her average. She'd never be beautiful, though she dressed in high Hollywood style – when she wasn't in slacks and flying jacket – but she could become famous, and the way for a flyer

to do that, in 1929, was to set records and win races. And right there, in the local paper, was a story about record-breaking pilot Bobbi Trout, who was issuing a challenge to other women pilots to compete in a forty-mile air race, back and forth between Van Nuys and Glendale. It would be, Trout said, the very first women's air race in history, and that sounded pretty good to Pancho. She signed up there and then. The only other taker was Margaret Parry, a local aviatrix and airport owner.

Pancho had no intention of losing the race and took no chances. Her Travel Air was far more powerful than either of the other planes; she won comfortably but, more profitably, the race marked the beginning of a long friendship with Bobbi Trout and gained Pancho a good deal of the publicity she craved. She was also beginning to earn a good living (not that she needed it with her inheritance coming through) working as a test pilot for Lockheed and Beechcraft. The big companies had realised the publicity value in employing female aviators as representatives, flying saleswomen, executives and test pilots and many young women found this a useful way to get their hands on planes of a quality and class far outside their normal experience. But nobody ever got famous by going to the office every day – even a flying office – and Pancho was still looking round for something she could really get her racing teeth into; like, for instance, a 3000 mile derby across the continental United States: the so-called Powder Puff Derby.

The entrance qualifications, a licence and at least one hundred hours flying time, presented no problems for Pancho, she'd racked up far more than that over the past few months. She was also confident that her Travel Air 400 with its 200 hp Wright Whirlwind engine would stand a good chance of being placed, maybe even of winning, although she had to admit, if only to herself, there were pilots with far more experience than she'd gained: Marvel Crossen, Phoebe Omlie, who taught William Faulkner to fly (and must be held at least partly responsible for his worst novel, *Pylon*) and Louise Thaden; all multiple record-holders. If Pancho was to stand a real chance,

she needed to prepare. Flying long distances across the country without getting lost was still a seat-of-the-pants operation, depending on roadmaps, landmarks, roads, towns and railway lines. Every flyer Pancho knew had endless stories of following the wrong tracks or the right tracks in the wrong direction, sometimes for hundreds of miles. Up there, in just about every kind of bad weather that a land mass as big as the United States could throw at you, it was not easy to get and stay oriented. There was glaring sun, storms, mist and Pancho's one weakness, low cloud – something she would never come to terms with; she always worried that somewhere in the cloud mass there would be a lurking mountain big enough to clout even her out the sky.

She wanted to familiarise herself with the course by over-flying it in advance (not against the rules) so she could have speed, times and landmarks worked out before the start. She could afford the time and the fuel more than many of the other entrants and, with preparation and the power of her engine, she was certain that this was going to be the race that would bring her to national prominence.

She lined up with the other starters and, when the pistol shot was broadcast from Cleveland, began to taxi forward behind her friend Marvel Crossen, with whom she would be rooming overnight during the race.

The first day's run was a short hop to San Bernadino, and Pancho made it in under 28 minutes, which put her in the lead – though she knew that that was just a warm-up and the real flying would start on the next leg, over the desert to Phoenix. A mid-flight stop was scheduled at a little desert strip at Calexico, and many of the flyers were concerned about whether the soft surface of the runway would provide enough support, particularly for the heavier planes. The race authorities refused to change the route until an angry Pancho collected signatures from every flyer and presented a petition that read very much like a demand. The stopover was changed to Yuma.

The second day was brutal, in more ways than one. By the midday stop Pancho had lost her lead, following the wrong

set of railway tracks despite all her efforts to avoid this. At the end of the day, a pall was cast over the arrival at Phoenix by the news of Marvel Crossen's death. After the death of her roommate, Pancho herself was to fly only one more leg of the Derby.

The following day the competitors flew on to Pecos. A ruptured fuel line cost Pancho her place among the leaders but she was still confident she could make up any loss as she sighted the airfield that evening, coming in to make a perfect landing that suddenly turned into a nightmare. Out of nowhere, something hit the undercarriage, throwing the Travel Air violently to one side; the upper and lower wings slammed into the ground, crumpling as the plane spun out of control and skidded to a halt. As Pancho climbed out, she saw a car driving rapidly away; an over-eager spectator had actually driven on to the runway for a better view and parked just in the blind spot that was caused by the large engine cowling of the plane. The driver was never identified; fortunately for him. Pancho was unhurt, but the plane was a write-off. She said, 'I have flown that plane for 200 hours. I have flown it from coast to coast and from one border of the country to the other. Never before had I damaged it and, of course, my first accident would have to come on an occasion of this kind. I circled the field before landing, but that confounded automobile must have stayed right under the blind spot . . . and I never saw it. My right lower wing hit it. The plane described an exaggerated ground loop and the left wing hit.'

'That *confounded* auto?' Either Pancho was on her best behaviour that afternoon or the local reporter from *The Wichita Eagle* wasn't up to taking down her epithets verbatim. Biographer and friend Grover Ted Tate, in conversations with Pancho, heard a more believable version: 'Some damned harebrained sonofabitch drove his truck smack into the side of my airplane and knocked it for a loop!' Either way, she was out of the race and, after arranging for her plane to be shipped back to the Travel Air factory, she hitched a ride to Cleveland where she was at the finish line to

welcome Louise Thaden as she won the first ever Woman's Continental Derby.

Pancho wasn't downcast. At the Cleveland National Air Races, held over the week following the Derby, the biggest success had been a new superfast single-cockpit racer designed by Walter Beech of Travel Air and known as the Mystery Ship. With a top speed of 200 mph and a 'clean' design with radical low wings, the scarlet monoplane grabbed the attention of every flyer on the scene as it beat even the fast army racers; it not only flew so fast that 'it took three men to see it', it also looked like a dream. Numbers were strictly limited but Pancho heard a rumour that one was available for the price of $12 500. If she could get hold of the craft, the speed records held by Louise Thaden and Phoebe Omlie, or anyone else for that matter, would tumble before her. She would be the fastest woman on the planet.

She bought the plane and, being Pancho, began to show it off around the airfields. Howard Hughes, then a young film producer, was impressed. He'd recently finished making a flying epic about the Great War, *Hell's Angels*; unfortunately, during the prolonged post-production period sound had arrived and silent movies were no longer popular. Hughes had decided to put a soundtrack on his film but the plane engines he'd recorded somehow didn't have the impact he wanted once they were transferred to the screen. When he heard Pancho pulling out the throttle on the 425 hp Wright engine he knew he had found his ideal sound; he employed her to stunt her plane around a tethered balloon with recording equipment in the basket, and for a couple of days she had fun swooping down on the balloon, climbing past it and producing just about every aircraft noise Hughes was ever likely to need, short of crashing.

The film was a big success and Pancho's stock in the exclusive world of stunt flyers began to rise. Her public persona also rose when in August 1930 she beat Amelia Earhart's speed record with a time, over a measured course, of 196 mph. A year later she lost the record to Ruth Nichols but gained a cross-country speed record, flying from Los

Angeles to Sacramento in 2 hours and 13 minutes. This earned her no money – the flight was for charity – but gained her a sponsorship deal with Union Oil. She appeared in a series of magazine adverts: 'Mrs Barnes knew that for maximum power, uniformity and dependability, Union-ethyl gasoline has no equal. We are glad that it met her expectations!' She also got a cup, presented by the Governor, inscribed 'America's fastest woman flyer'.

Everything was looking good for Pancho and she started looking around for a new lover, and thought she'd found him in Duncan Renaldo, another man in the physical mould of Don Rockwell; dashing, fiery with a dazzling smile and a film career that was gathering momentum all the time. Renaldo had started as an extra but rapidly became a film star, in the style of Ramon Navarro, though his tastes inclined towards women rather than men. But not, unfortunately, towards Pancho. Despite her enthusiasm – she gave him the run of her mansions and drinks cabinets and was never in the habit of sparing the dollars – he resisted her charms, if not her largesse, as long as it lasted. He could see as well as anybody that things were looking a little unstable in the money markets; it began to be apparent that the endless party that was the 1920s, for the young and rich, was about to come to an end with a hangover and economic depression.

The Dobbins' wealth provided a cushion for a while and Pancho carried on with her usual lifestyle; she could hardly have lived in any other manner. Money had never meant anything to her when it was there in abundance, and she wasn't about to change her way of thinking just because the dollar was sinking. She even took a short flight into politics, standing as candidate for Supervisor for Los Angeles Third District. She was supported by Hollywood and her flying friends and put out an election address, calling herself Florence rather than Pancho Barnes, stating that, among many other virtues, she had an excellent understanding of women's issues, economics and children's welfare. But not presumably of truth, since little Billy, getting bigger every

day, would hardly have recognised his mother if she'd formally introduced herself.

She stood as an Independent – neither Republicans nor Democrats would have touched her – and though she gave a good show, sky-writing her name in smoke above the city, she had neither policies nor anything else to offer the voters. The explanation for the adventure may lie in the practice of bringing in an independent candidate to split the other side's vote in a tight seat. The ex-deputy Governor of the state, Buron Fitts, who was standing for the district attorney's office, was something of a political fixer and he had been the one to encourage Pancho to try out her political wings. After the election, which Pancho lost and Fitts' party organisation won overall, the new DA paid Pancho to fly him and his advisers to Mexico. All in all, it was probably a foregone conclusion and Pancho got some fun and some subsidised flying out of it.

She also got a visit to Mexico City where she was stopped at the door of a notorious brothel one night while Fitts and his buddies strode in. 'No ladies', she was told. She could have told the doorman that she *was* no lady, but he wasn't in the mood to listen. Next night Pancho appeared again, in the uniform of a Mexican Air Force Colonel (perhaps borrowed from the lingerie eater?) and strode in, slugging the doorman as she passed. She hired a couple of girls and took them back to Fitts' hotel room but the new DA and his friends were too tired to perform, so Pancho bought the girls a drink and sent them back. All in all, Los Angeles Third District was probably lucky to escape getting Pancho as their Supervisor.

This was the last of the good times for a while. Even Pancho's wealth had its limits and, as stocks plunged, so her income began to dry up, and for the first time in her life she needed to earn money to eat. So she went back to the films with her plane and experience and joined up with a few of her old hangar buddies to form the Association of Motion Picture Pilots (AMPP). The union aimed to protect stunt flyers and their livelihood at a time when anyone with a plane would work for a few dollars a day and most

producers were happy to hire them, despite their inexperience. The AMPP was able to bring some order to the stunt business, and save a lot of lives, since tyro pilots were cracking up or spinning in – the group never ever said 'crash' – at an alarming rate.

Not that the professionals were getting off scot-free: films about flying were popular, one of the few sure-fire money-makers Hollywood was producing, and the stunts demanded were increasingly foolhardy. Good flyers were getting injured or dying, and the AMPP decided to do something about it. They reasoned that the biggest disadvantage of getting killed was that you missed your own funeral, so they instituted a tradition of living funerals, where each member got to attend his own last party. As for making the stunts somehow less dangerous, they were pilots, the best of the best, the toughest of the tough and not one of them would ever turn his or her back on a stunt because it was too dangerous.

Apart from lending room for club meetings, which inevitably ended up as drunken parties, Pancho's most significant contribution to the group was her fight to force producers to pay a proper rate for stunt flyers on their films. Howard Hughes was shooting two films, back to back, using non-union labour. Pancho didn't have a lot of respect for the billionaire's penny-pinching: 'Howard Hughes is a two-for-a-nickel son of a bitch,' she said. Hughes returned the compliment and refused to back down on his pay levels. Pancho, for once in her life, realised that this was not the time to use her fists, satisfying as that might have been. It was a question of union organisation, and in 1932 the AMPP managed to push through a raft of minimum pay agreements and flying safeguards that became the industry norm.

Being part of the AMPP had given Pancho a taste for organisation and, as the 1930s progressed, she turned her attention to the military. After all, if her grandfather, Thaddeus Lowe, had practically invented the US Air Force, why shouldn't Pancho follow his footsteps and create the

first real Women's Air Force? There had been a couple of earlier attempts to get women into some kind of auxiliary formation: the Betsy Ross Air Corps and the tautologically challenged Women's Aeronautical Air Force, both of which Pancho had joined and neither of which had produced anything of lasting value. So she decided to do something herself. She went to see an old friend, Army Air Force Colonel, later General, Hap Arnold and was introduced, by him, to LaVelle Sweeley, an aviatrix with experience, through her husband, of the Army Reserve. The two women got on well, found their ideas coincided and set about creating a Woman's Air Reserve. They were given support and facilities by the Army Air Force and soon began pulling in members from the west coast. A lot of film flyers joined; Vera Dawn Walker, Mary Iggens, Myrtle Mantz, Louise Thaden, Blanche Noyes and Bobbi Trout were also members; Amelia Earhart, though offering her support, predictably stayed clear of an organisation of which she would not be the public figurehead.

To be fair, Earhart may also have harboured certain doubts about Pancho as leader and flyer. She was in the middle of writing her book on flying and women pilots, *For The Love of It* and, while mentioning just about every prominent woman flyer in the country with approval, had not included Pancho at all. Always aware of publicity (married to a publicist, how could she not be?) she may not have wanted to criticise a fellow woman flyer, to avoid giving ammunition to the anti-women pilots lobby. She might also have wanted to preserve her reputation as the popular voice of women's flying, and a quarrel with Pancho Barnes, bound to be public and messy, would certainly have left her reputation muddy.

Pancho's response to Earhart's lack of enthusiasm – and she would certainly have read the book and noticed her exclusion – was uncharacteristically low-key at the time. Perhaps she too did not want to add fuel to the anti-women fire or, for once, reined in her indignation, knowing that Earhart was one of the most popular women in America. Privately, many years later, according to

Grover Ted Tate who knew her well, she considered Earhart 'a goddam robot', under the power of her manager and husband G. B. Putnam, who would 'wind her up and she'd go and do what he said. Whenever she fucked up, he would scold her like a child.' This may have been sour grapes or perhaps Pancho was seeing through the myth; she knew a bit about fakery herself and was always good at spotting it in others.

The man or woman who would hold the rope for a friend and hang on, despite knowing she was going to be pulled over the cliff edge too, was the kind of personality who gained her respect. Men like Doolittle and Yeager, women like Trout and Crossen – maybe, in the end, as she vanished over the Pacific, Earhart also joined that happy but suicidal band of brothers and sisters. And maybe not. Pancho always maintained, but never quite explained how, that she was present when a Navy radio operator picked up Earhart and Noonan's last signal: 'We heard her tell about being out of gas and heading for the sea', and Pancho never had any doubt that the plane went down over the ocean. Time has proved her right, though whether the story was true or just invented to emphasise the good judgement of a pilot who'd flown close to empty many times herself, we'll never, as with so many things in Pancho's life, quite be sure.

The Woman's Air Reserve was soon up and flying, with its own ranking system. Pancho, naturally was General Barnes. There was a training programme in place that included first aid and a mandate to push the National Air Licensing authorities into using the same guidelines and standards for men *and* women. The WAR's first mission was a three-plane cross-country flight from the west coast to Washington, sponsored by Gilmore Oil (in the Depression, fuel costs were a major burden on private pilots), where the pilots, Pancho, Bobbi Trout and Mary Charles, planned to hold talks on the subject of equal licensing. This, however, as far as General Barnes was concerned, was not the only or even the main purpose of the flight. Her old friend and hoped-for lover, actor Duncan Renaldo, had fallen foul of the immigration

laws – it turned out he wasn't an American born of Scots–Spanish parents in California, but a Romanian who had entered the country illegally. He had just finished shooting the film *Trader Horn* on location in Africa and, on arriving back in the States, had been arrested, charged, tried and sentenced to deportation. He appealed against the judgment but had been turned down. Pancho knew her feelings for Renaldo were not and never would be reciprocated but he was still a friend, and she was never one to let a friend down. Deciding that the only recourse was a direct appeal to the President, she called in a few favours from old family friends and got in to see him. She put her case for Renaldo as forcefully as usual. Roosevelt promised to look into the matter. On the way home the pilots stopped over in New York to attend a civic function in their honour and faced being arrested for breaking a local ordinance forbidding women to appear in public in men's clothing. As Captain Bobbi Trout recalls, explanations were offered to the offended society matrons and, in the face of the patriotic trio, prejudice was overthrown and the women of the Air Reserve were allowed to attend in their full dress uniforms of horizon blue jackets and trousers, black Sam Brown belts, ties, berets and puttees.

Back in California, Pancho heard that the deportation order against Renaldo had been set aside, although he would have to serve time for the offence. Renaldo was later to achieve fame as the Cisco Kid, whose boast was that he defeated the baddies using intelligence rather than violence. When he was caught in a tight corner, it was often his partner, Pancho, who got him out of trouble – a tribute, perhaps, to General Barnes and her rescue mission.

By the mid-1930s, Pancho was beginning to feel the effects of the Depression; ready money was short, credit was non-existent and the property market had dropped through the floor. Her cliffside house had been reclaimed by the bank after she'd defaulted on the mortgage; she still had her San Marino mansion but didn't want to sell it if she could avoid it, though she couldn't really afford

the upkeep. Stunt work was drying up – there were younger, sharper, more skilled pilots in the AMPP – and the public were no longer flocking to the air circuses. Pylon racing was still drawing the crowds but this had never been Pancho's thing; she preferred cross-country flying but, as the years passed, so the records fell and the distances increased. To get noticed, younger flyers, both male and female, were now setting out to cross the world and back. To cover everyday expenses, she borrowed $5000 from fellow flyer Paul Mantz, putting up her beloved Mystery Ship as collateral. He would have the use of it and would keep it in good flying condition, while she could use it any time she needed, within reason.

Pancho's solution to her financial problems was to fall back on her old skills of breeding and raising horses, but it was clear that coastal California was going to be too expensive for such an operation. She needed to relocate, and she knew just the place. Antelope Valley lies about 75 miles north of Los Angeles; it's a desolate place, part of the Mojave desert, without vegetation or water, the tiny population scattered over a large area, the main occupation alfalfa farming. Over the millennia, wind erosion and evaporation in the great heat had created a number of so-called 'dry lakes', where the salt surface was hard and flat enough to make almost perfect landing sites. These conditions had drawn the US Air Force to the area to set up a training programme at Muroc, later renamed Edwards Air Force Base. In the mid-1930s the base was no more than a collection of tents, a few huts and a fuel dump where pilots could fly in, refuel and practise their bombing runs over the desert but in years to come, the base would grow into one of the most important flight research centres in the USA. It would also prove both a blessing and a curse to Pancho.

She had first seen the area when she'd overflown it, and noticed how suitable it would be for an emergency landing. Now, looking to relocate, she found a ranch at Muroc, which was being offered in exchange for a city property. She flew up to look it over, landing on a perfect dry lake surface

that was part of the property. The owner had drilled for and found abundant water – it flowed far underground – and created something of an oasis in the desert. Pancho liked what she saw and thought that, with a bit of work, she could turn the ranch into something that would yield a good living and, more important, be fun. The natural landing strip would mean friends could fly in when they wanted; all she would have to do was create a place they'd want to visit, and she'd never had any trouble doing that. She still owned an office building in LA and she offered it as her part of the exchange. The farmer accepted and she was now owner of Rancho Oro Verde, a cluster of buildings and a few hundred acres of the Mojave desert.

It didn't stay that way for long. Forced to rely on her own resources, without the cushion of wealth, Pancho reacted very much as she had in Mexico. She started having fun planning and then building a series of guest huts – and huts they were, though in later years they became increasingly more luxurious – and setting herself up as an alfalfa grower and dairy farmer. She began to supply the nearby Air Force base with milk, just as it began supplying guests for her bar and restaurant and swill for the hogs she bought in, and sold back, as meat, to the base. It was a perfect system, as long as peace existed between Pancho and the Air Force.

She had a new lover, Logan 'Granny' Nourse, a rangy, good-looking rancher who had plans of his own but enjoyed Pancho's company so much he was happy to put them on hold and help run Oro Verde. Something he didn't appreciate was the habit of the Air Force pilots of using his truck as a target for their practice bombing runs, dropping sacks of sand or even cement around him as he desperately tried to outrun them.

Pancho, predictably, loved the pilots and the wilder they were, the better she liked it; evenings at the ranch could last into the next day, when the pilots made their sorry way back to base – Edwards was still a tent town at this time – hungover and unsteady. Not that Pancho had any problems keeping order. At a local bar one night, not hers, some fellow

started causing trouble and Pancho, after asking him politely to 'fuck off and let me eat my dinner in peace', and not getting an acceptable response, hit him so hard under the chin that she lifted him clean across the table without so much as spilling a drop of booze. The story was probably an exaggeration – but not much of one, and her reputation began to get around. She was tough and, she was doing ranch work, getting tougher every day. If she had any regrets, it was that she had less time for flying: but if she couldn't fly out, friends could fly in. She set up an airstrip with tying-down facilities and hangar/huts and offered the service as part of the overnight deal for visitors.

The Reverend Rankin Barnes had come to a decision of his own. He'd fallen in love and wanted to marry, despite the problems a divorce would cause to his career ambitions. Maybe he'd had enough of climbing the ecclesiastical greasy pole or perhaps the love of a good woman was worth the sacrifice. Either way, he asked Pancho for a divorce and she was happy to oblige. Maybe *she* was getting sentimental, but the idea of getting married to Duncan Renaldo, who'd just got out of jail, was beginning to look good; though not, unfortunately to the future Cisco Kid. The only desert he wanted to see was on a back lot in Hollywood; he remained friends with Pancho but never succumbed to her charm. Granny Nourse also had other things to do and, deciding that the ranch was now well established, he set off for home, leaving Pancho with her son Billy. Now aged 14, he came to stay and, in some accounts, enjoyed life at the ranch, in others, he hated it like rattlesnake poison.

Pancho loved the ranch and, as war in Europe began to seem increasingly likely, and the Air Force strengthened its presence at Edwards, she decided to expand her facilities still further. The huts were improved and became lodges, the bar and dining-room extended, a swimming pool, surrounded by trees, was built, stables were put up and riding horses bought: her brochures now called the place Rancho Pancho, the Flying Dude Ranch. She also found a new lover, Mac Mckendry, who moved in with his son; the boy received

rather more of Pancho's care and attention than Pancho's own son, though considering her advice to the child's teacher ('If he doesn't behave, beat the shit outta him') Billy probably wasn't that upset about it.

During the war years Edwards grew into a major Air Force facility; business boomed and Pancho began to think it might boom even more if she got rid of her dairy and opened a casino. Setting the idea of a steady earner against the excitement of a fast buck was never any contest with her and the cows went. Unfortunately, the gamblers didn't arrive and after a few months the gambling den closed down. Pancho wasn't concerned; she'd always rather look to the future than look back at the past; and the future was about to arrive on her doorstep with a bang!

The sound barrier was considered by many in aviation to be an impassable wall through which man and plane would never burst. Not so by the pilots of the experimental flight programme at Edwards. The best of the best, with more 'right stuff' than most of them really knew what to do with, they brought, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, an entirely new atmosphere to the ranch and Pancho responded by creating an entirely new ranch.

Nobody quite knows how the Happy Bottom Riding Club really got its name but most people who were there agree it probably had more to do with the riding that was available than the beautiful hostesses who might or might not – depending on where you stood during various later court cases – also be available. Suffice to say that Pancho employed a number of young women to work as waitresses, all of whom shared the name Smith: January Smith, Tuesday Smith, Nevada Smith and so on. Pancho reckoned it added an air of mystery to the place. As for the boys who came for the girls, she reckoned that if they were old enough to risk their lives jockeying jets out in the wild blue yonder, they were old enough to handle some feminine company. The management put up a sign that said: WE ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE HUSTLING AND BUSTLING THAT MAY GO ON HERE. LOTS OF

PEOPLE BUSTLE AND SOME HUSTLE, BUT THAT'S THEIR BUSINESS AND A VERY OLD ONE.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, many of the test pilots had brought their families out to the housing set up by the Air Force and though, special events apart, they rarely took them to Pancho's, her account is almost certainly as true as anything she ever said. What the pilots did at the Riding Club, like most pilots in most bars the world over, was drink and talk about flying, and remember dead buddies from the war and from the X-1 and X-2 programmes.

The club was really a club within a club, for flyers only, named the Blow and Go. It had membership cards and the first was given to Jimmy Doolittle, a hero of the past, and the second to a hero of the future, one of the very few human beings Pancho ever admired unreservedly, Chuck Yeager. One night a civilian visitor to the club expressed some doubt about the ability of Yeager and his co-pilot Bob Hoover to fly the Bell Experimental Plane. Pancho responded: 'These two can fly right up your ass and tickle your right eyeball, and you wouldn't even know why you were farting shock waves.'

It was at Pancho's, on the night before he was to fly the Bell X-1 faster than sound for the first time, that Yeager had his famous accident. Cantering back after a desert trip, in the dark, he misjudged the gate of the corral and fell off his horse, breaking two ribs. He realised that the moment he reported the injury, he'd be out of the cockpit, so he didn't; he got himself tightly bandaged by a local doctor, went back to base and flew the next morning, using a sawn-off broom handle to close the cockpit catch. The X-1, more like a rocket with wings than a plane, was dropped from a converted bomber and Yeager blasted off into history, breaking the sound barrier with a boom that echoed across the salt flats of the Mojave desert.

Short of breaking the barrier herself, Yeager's flight was one of the great moments in Pancho's life and the celebrations that night were pretty great too. It was the climax of the Happy Bottom Riding Club and though things appeared to go on the same way for years to come, the edge

of the envelope had been touched and what had gone up, was now beginning to come down.

The descent was hard to spot from the ground. The guests kept arriving and parties went on; Pancho moved into the rodeo business, which allowed her to indulge her old passion and expertise for horses. Leaflets were sent out advertising the attraction, and thousands attended the three-day events – one hell of a lot of fun was had by all and the ranch was admitted to the Rodeo Society of America. It was fun but, in the end, not profitable. Pancho had never really understood the concept of breaking even, never mind making money. She was happy as long as she could keep going, and keep on having fun and keep on helping out when it was needed. More than one of the test pilots found himself and his whole family being put up at Pancho's expense while house hunting in the vicinity, and it was a rare drifter or down-and-out who did not receive at least a handout and more likely a bed in the bunkhouse, a decent meal (and meals at the Club were decent enough to feed two to bursting) and the offer of a job if it looked like the fellow could put in an honest day. That was all Pancho ever really asked of anyone – honesty: in their flying, in their stories (more or less), and in their character. It was not all the Internal Revenue Service asked: they wanted their taxes and Pancho was in constant trouble, since she was never up to date in either national or local taxes. As for personal loans, well, what kind of person would ever ask for their money back? She never would. However, Paul Mantz did; he asked for the repayment of his $5000, Pancho didn't have it and her Mystery Ship became his. She couldn't complain but, somewhere deep inside, she couldn't really understand how one pilot could take another's ship for any reason.

Paying tax didn't bother her over much, she was always ready to give other people handouts, so she reckoned someone would come to her rescue, if necessary. But things were changing all around her. As the records were knocked down in the skies over the Mojave desert, the complexion of Edwards Air Force Base began to alter: the cowboys and all

their virtues were becoming old-fashioned. It was a new kind of military, facing the threat of Communism, with new leaders who didn't see things Pancho's way. The Cold War was not fun: it was a deadly serious business, at least in their opinion, and one of the things they needed was more land for training men to fly the big bombers. Ranchers close to the base found themselves receiving compulsory purchase orders; some were glad to go, since making a living out of the desert was hard, unforgiving work; others had grown to love the place and its spare beauty, the way it bloomed suddenly, once in a decade perhaps, after a storm, coming alive in an explosion of colour.

None of this made any difference to the military: they needed the space, they would have the space. The only question lay in the valuation and, as their grasp reached out toward the Happy Bottom Riding Club, in the determination of the landowner not to give in. For Pancho, the letter advising her that the military required her land was a double blow. There was the derisory amount they were offering for the business loss she would suffer but worse, far worse, was what she saw as a betrayal by an organisation she had always loved and supported: the Air Force.

Throughout her life as a pilot, she had known and respected men like Chuck Yeager and General 'Hap' Arnold, Second World War Air Force chief, and James Doolittle, leader of a daring bombing raid over Tokyo in the early days of the war; they were her kind of guys. You could trust them because there was not one speck of bullshit in them. And now, here she was, facing a vast mountain of legal bullshit being shovelled over her ranch by the Air Force itself.

She still flew, though her case against the military, in which she represented herself, began to take up more and more time and money and keeping up maintenance on her planes became harder. In the early 1950s she took her old desert buddy Roger Chute down to Mexico where they flew around mountains and Pancho landed on a tiny island off Mazatlán, simply because nobody had been crazy enough to do it before. In typical Pancho fashion, though Chute didn't

know it till near the end of the trip, she was flying without a licence; she'd just neglected to renew it one year, maybe because she was getting worried about her health – the high blood pressure which had killed her mother was starting to be a serious problem for her too – or because the form-filling, time-consuming bureaucracy of the whole business was getting on her nerves or just because she didn't. After all, who would mind? She was Pancho Barnes. Roger Chute agreed, she hadn't changed a bit from the girl he'd known 30 years before, he said, only her reactions *were* slowing down a little so perhaps she'd fly with a little more care.

The Air Force still wanted her land but rather than wait for them to act, she moved first and took them to court. She said, 'I never ran away from a fight in my life and I'm sure as shit not running from these peckerwoods.'

Hearings followed, in which two, three or four Air Force attorneys faced one woman across the courtroom; the men in uniform or sober suits, Pancho in checked shirt, jeans and cowboy boots. She was no lawyer but she was shrewd enough to duck and weave and keep on the move, and if she never looked like winning, she didn't look ready to lose either.

After a number of skirmishes, she managed to pin the Air Force down and make them issue an offer of $250 000, which she promptly rejected. She was almost certainly right to do so; the development she'd funded at the Oro Verde Ranch and the business it had generated deserved a better price. But it wasn't really the money that was the issue. She was desperate to put off the day she would have to pack up and move. In her early life, houses and their grounds had always been there, with everything she had wanted, from an exercise track for her horses to a swimming pool on the edge of a cliff overlooking the sea. At Oro Verde she had found a working ranch and made it into 'practically a small village', her village; her world where guests flew in, where beautiful bar girls never broke the law, where pilots sat around all night and told flying stories. It was hers and she was going to lose it but in the end even that didn't matter.

Losing wasn't the point, giving up was: she wouldn't hand anything over to the government without a fight – even after a disaster that would have floored anyone else.

In late 1953 the ranch caught fire; it was thought that a drifter she'd taken in had upset a stove while drinking. In the dry desert heat, the flames spread rapidly from the tackroom and stables to the visitor cabins and then to the main house. Fire-fighters arrived but ran out of water; the swimming pool had been emptied for cleaning and a storage cistern, which held thousands of gallons, was overlooked. All of Pancho's horses were killed when the stables went up: saddles, equipment, Pancho's possessions – paintings, books, mementoes - were all burnt: the damage was estimated at $300 000. The fire chief wasn't convinced by the drunken drifter story; he thought that the fire had started in more than one place and had been encouraged to burn. There were those who said it was a deranged ex-sergeant from Edwards Base, who'd been connected with a number of unexplained fires and, subsequently, arrested for skulking around the ranch. There were even those who said Pancho had set it herself to collect on the insurance, although it would have been utterly out of character for her to have risked the lives of her beloved horses; she'd sooner have burnt herself, and she wasn't about to do that: the place might be ashes and charred wood, but she would keep up the struggle.

And she won. It was crazy, and it shouldn't have happened in the second half of the twentieth century, but after three years of fighting her own case, appearing day after day in courts all over the state, humping vast piles of paper around – her strength standing her in good stead here – three years of appearing in front of juries arguing her case, not always well or coherently, but passionately and, more important, convincingly, the ordinary people listened and found for her and judgment was issued in her favour. The government must up their price and pay, with interest, $400 000, for the ranch at Oro Verde. Of course, she lost in the end. She had to move out.

Money had never meant anything to her, it didn't now. She paid four years' of back-taxes, a huge sum, met the various legal expenses she'd run up, and moved north, close to the snowy peaks of the Sierra Nevada mountains, buying a small ranch called Gypsy Springs on land even less promising and more remote than Oro Verde. She bought the local (20 miles away) café and the run-down gas station, she bought a plane and a cabin cruiser, she bought a large colour television, even though there was no electricity to run it. She wasn't spending money, she was just having some fun; the ranch was desolate, water was short, the house was almost a ruin, without electricity or proper flooring, but she'd been here before and built an oasis in the desert; she could do it again.

She bought horses and hogs, meaning to start up her recycling operations again, but here there was no Air Force Base to act as her customer, and few visitors were prepared to make the long trek out to the mountain landscape. Mortgage payments were missed, bills ignored, tax demands lost or chewed up by the dogs she kept. Her old friends were doing just that: getting older, and they now had families and career responsibilities. Only Pancho was the same, but she wasn't: in the late 1950s she got breast cancer and had a double mastectomy which, in typical fashion, she'd show to anyone, whether they wanted to see or not. The doctors told her that due to muscle damage sustained during the operation on her right breast, she'd lose the strength in her right arm. She told them: no way. She exercised the arm constantly, ignoring the pain, until she got full use of it back; she could give up anything – her house, flying, breasts but she would not give up her own physical strength. The only thing that could take it away from her was time and illness, and she struggled with both of these during the early 1960s; there was also an acrimonious divorce with Mac Mckendrick, whom she had married along the way.

She didn't give up, but she did start to look in the other direction more and more, ignoring what she couldn't avoid as goods and property were sold to pay tax and bills. She just

wasn't feeling the way she used to, which wasn't surprising: she had thyroid trouble and she was close to dying, unable, as the days went by, to do much more than drag herself out of bed in the morning to feed her dogs, then drag herself back without eating. And she would have died had not Ted Tate, a young aeroplane engineer who had known of Pancho since the Happy Bottom days, called in on the off-chance of seeing her. There was a lot of yelling back and forth through the door of the shack – for some reason Pancho just wouldn't come out until finally she asked the young man if he was visiting formally or informally. Looking around him, at the scrubland, at the tiny, almost ruined shack, the dogs roaming, the ancient truck, he asked what on earth difference it made. Pancho, with the hauteur of a queen, informed him that since her recent operation, she only put her rubber tits on for formal visiting – and if Tate didn't mind, she'd leave them off today.

She eventually came out, and Tate got her to hospital where treatment allowed her remarkable constitution to gather its strength and fight back. When she got out, Tate told her that old buddies from the experimental programme at Edwards Air Force Base had instituted a Pancho Barnes First Citizen of Edwards celebration in her honour. The bar was open, there were friends to drink with and, most important of all, the chance to sit around and indulge in a bit of hangar flying and tell stories of the Happy Bottom Riding Club and the night when two businessmen ordered up the best dishes the house could provide and got two of the hostesses served in vast bread rolls; or the morning Yeager buzzed the ranch house so closely that tiles bounced off the roof and the base commander, who should never have been there at all, complained that his 'sleep' had been disturbed.

It was a great evening and Pancho, once again the centre of attention, loved every second. Then she went back to the desert.

In a way, things settled down. She began to accept her limitations. Her old Travel Air Mystery Ship, which had passed into the ownership of pilot Paul Mantz, was

auctioned. Her son Billy, now a married airline professional and more or less reconciled with his mother, took her to the auction. There were a number of interested bidders (the ship was one of only two surviving) but Pancho's presence ensured that Billy's bid was successful: the Mystery Ship was back in the family.

Pancho wasn't really up to flying the plane any more. She took lessons for more than a year but the new Federal Avaiation Authority regulations proved a little too restrictive for her free spirit and, truth to tell, her reactions weren't up to it any more either. Roger Chute wrote to her, asking her if she really wanted to end such an illustrious career mashed up in a pile of wreckage.

After she had accepted this, and Chute was among the very few she respected enough to listen to, she returned to the desert and her dogs. She started an autobiography but she had never been the sort of character to stick with a project for that long; she lectured occasionally but mostly kept herself busy with the law, throwing herself with all her old energy into litigation against anyone who raised her ire, and that included a lot of people. Lesser matters, like housekeeping or clearing up behind herself, had never been particularly important in her life and that didn't change now: as she told a friend, there had always been someone there to do those jobs and if there wasn't any more, well, who cared?

In fact, quite a lot of people, who would otherwise have spent time with her, found her increasing eccentricity hard to take. Some close friends overlooked her habit of asking her driver to stop so she could get out of the car and squat to urinate at the side of the road, or her tendency to pull up her shirt so visitors could inspect her mastectomy scars or squeak her rubber tits; most found it impossible. When visiting or giving her talks – always without a script, just pulling great story after great story out of her memory – she would put on a dress and a wig and at least pass for respectable, but at home, in her little stone shack, she let things go because she really didn't care. Just as she'd never been the kind of teenage Pasadena debutante her family wanted, so she simply

couldn't be the kind of elderly heroine of the skies her admirers expected.

She died alone at the age of 70. She was due to give a talk to a local historical society and, when she didn't turn up, her son Billy went to visit her and found her. Permission was granted by the Air Force for a fly-by over the site of the Happy Bottom Riding Club, where her ashes were scattered; and a memorial service was held at which Jimmy Doolittle spoke the eulogy. He ended, 'I can just see her up there at this very minute. In her inimitable way, with a wry smile . . . (watching us now) remarking, ''I wondered what the little bald-headed old bastard was going to say''.'

She was who she was – difficult, sometimes impossible, selfish and generous to a fault, a tough enemy but a friend who would be loyal to the end, a bad mother, a terrible wife, but above all, a pilot and some kind of a woman.